

Central Illinois Country Schools



By: Dale C. Maley

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Central Illinois Country Schools

- Drivers for Country School creation
- Typical Facility Design
- Typical Teacher Training
- Typical Student & Teacher Experiences
- Reasons for Country School Obsolescence
- Fate of Country School Buildings
- Livingston County Reference Document

Why Country Schools?



Early Farming very labor intensive

Why Country Schools?

- Farming very labor intensive in 1860s
- Initially, 80 acres was maximum that one family could farm
- Had large families to provide labor to work on the farm
- 640 acres per square mile
 $640/80 \text{ Acres} = 8 \text{ Families per square mile}$
 $8 \text{ Families} \times 8 \text{ Children/Family} = 64 \text{ children per Square mile}$
- Township is 6 mile by 6 mile with 36 Sections
- $36 \text{ square miles} \times 64 \text{ Children/Square mile} = 2,304 \text{ Students Per Township!}$

Livingston County Country School System Design

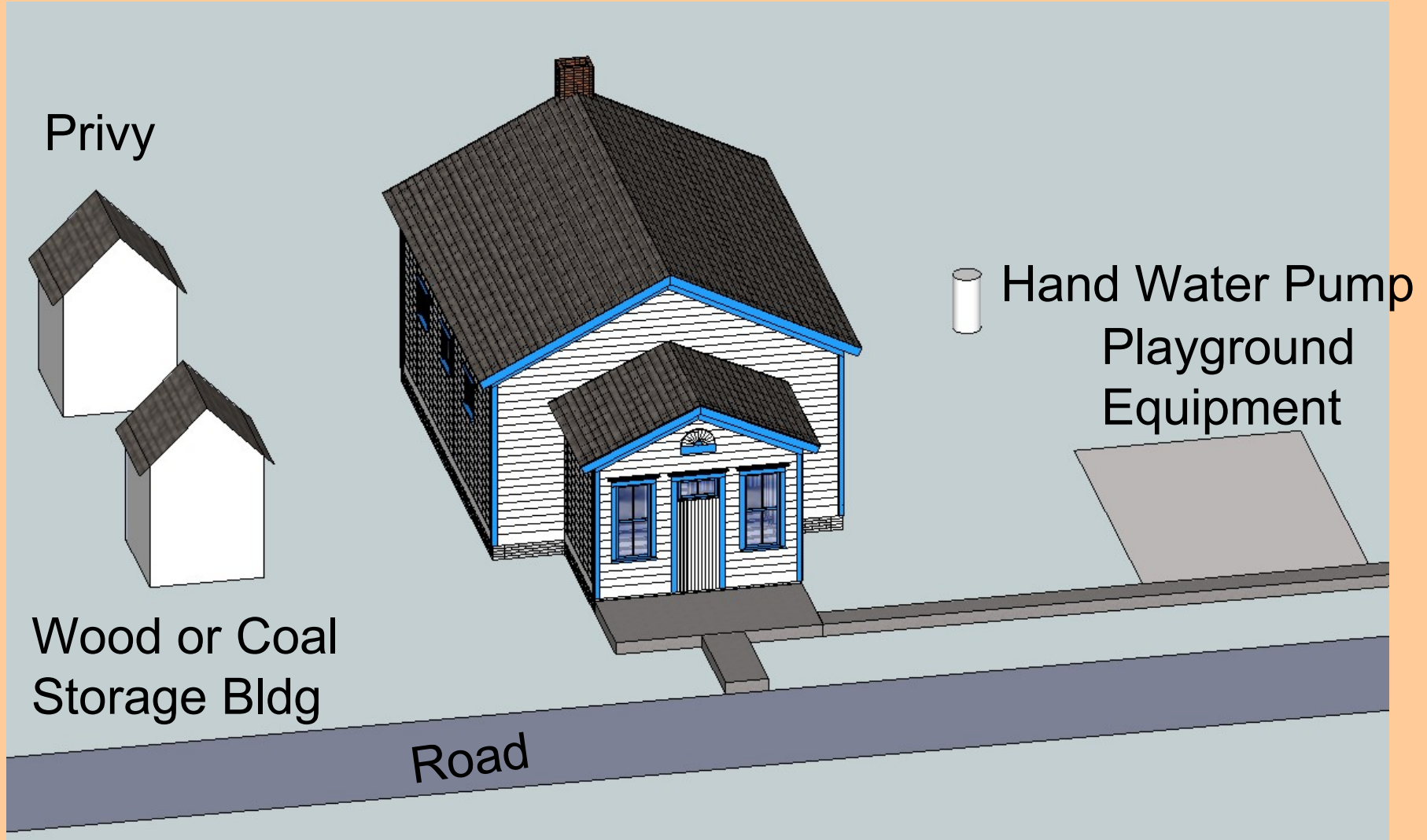
- 1,046 Square Miles in the County
- 6,000 students in 1897
- 299 Country Schools in County
- $6,000 \text{ Students} / 299 \text{ Schools} = 20 \text{ Pupils per school}$
- $6,000 \text{ Students} / 1,046 \text{ Square Miles} = 5.7 \text{ Pupils per Square Mile}$

Labor Efficiency had improved from 1860 to 1897

How to Educate all These Farm Children?

- Schools organized by Township
- Did not want children to walk more than 1 mile to school
- So country schools were located 2 miles apart
- 1 teacher taught grades 1 through 8
- After 8th grade, boys often quit schooling and farmed with Dad
 - Girls could attend High School in town, if they had a way to get there
- There were 299 country schools in Livingston County
- 17 country schools in Fairbury area (Avoca, Indian Grove, Belle Prairie)

Typical Facility Design



Hang coats in small entry room.

Typical Facility Design

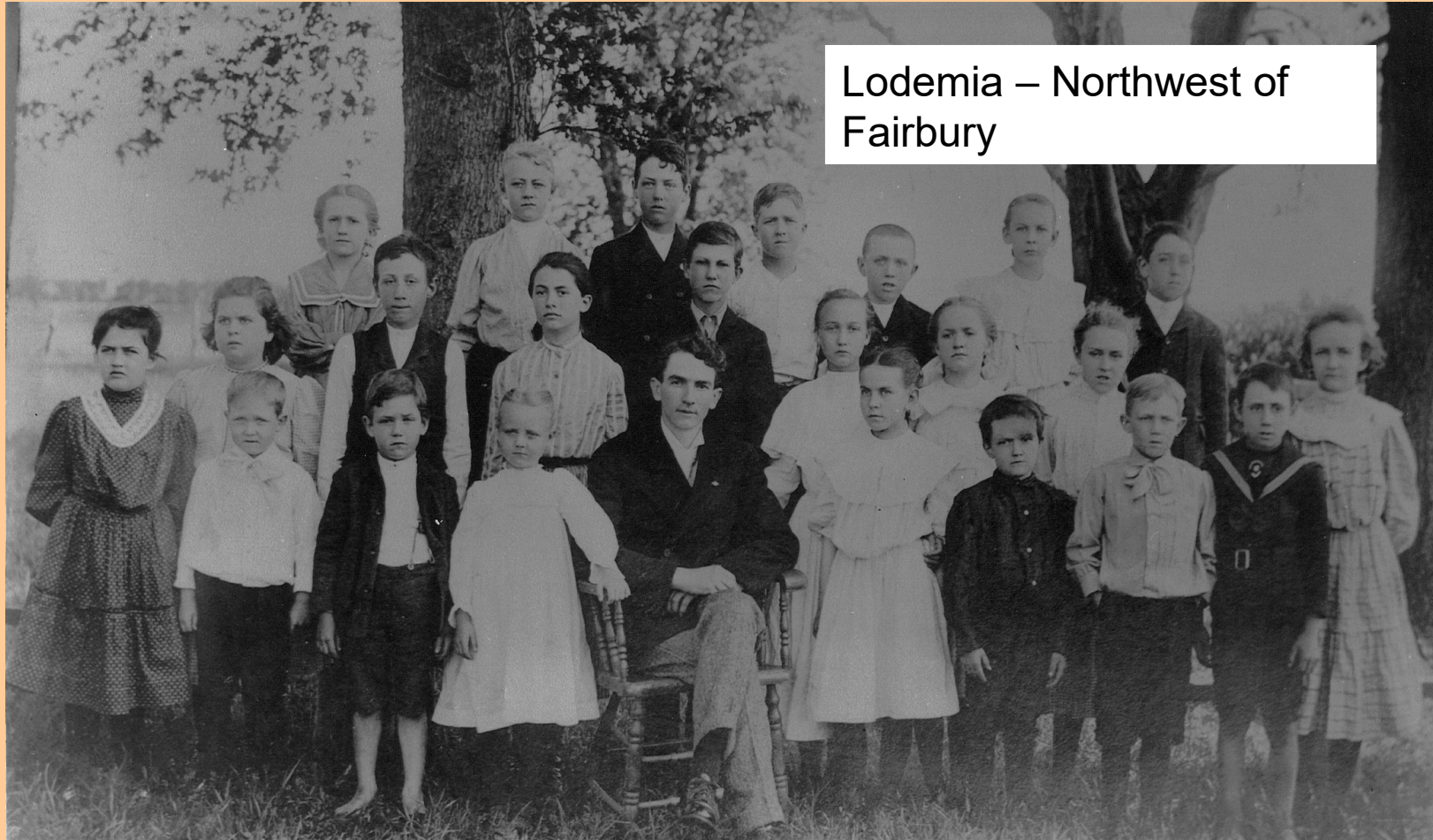
- Farmer would donate land for school house
- Farmers served by school would build the building(s)
- Foundations often stacked rock
- All wood construction, likely wood shingles
 - Later luxury option was plastered walls with large bulletin boards fastened to wall
- No Insulation
- Difficult to heat and no Air-Conditioning!

Typical Facility Design

- Later buildings had chemical toilet in small entry room
- 12 Inch Steel pipe and teacher had to periodically drop chemicals into the pipe
- Odors trapped in small entry room !
- Some schools had radios.
Kids were expected to memorize grain prices
and report to Dad when they got home 😊

Lodemia – Northwest of
Fairbury

1907



Back row - Emma Guthrie - Bessie Stock - Horace Bodley - Clinton Stewart - Clarence Friant - Jennie Shaper - Carl Banker
 2nd row - James Bodley - Hope Micken - John Friant - Frances Erdick - Lee Rice - Laura Tucker - Esther Guthrie - Hazel Banker - Avis Bodley
 Front row - Stewart - Granville Bodley - Ruth Stock - Charles Lasenee Teacher - Marie Shaper - Paul Bodley - Stewart
 Lodemia School - about 1907





1931



1948
Beehive
East of
Fairbury

Typical Teacher Training

- Illinois Governor William H. Bissell signed the law creating Illinois State Normal University (ISNU) on February 18, 1857.
- The name was chosen because the school was established to prepare teachers and "Normal" meant "teaching."
- Origins of the term go back to the French Revolution, with would-be teachers learning the standards, or "norms," of pedagogy.
- The name served the institution well for more than a century. In the aftermath of World War II, however, societal changes led to concerns from many that the name was too narrow for a school with a larger mission.

- ISNU was one of five teachers' colleges in Illinois
- Change to Illinois State University at Normal in 1964
- Name became Illinois State University in 1967



- ISNU had 2-Year program for training teachers
- Some women finished high school at 16, then attended ISNU
- They became teachers at age 18, not much older than some of their students!

Two Biggest Events Each School Year

- Christmas Pageant
- Track & Scholastic Competition
 - Fathers supervised outdoors track games
 - Mothers supervised indoors scholastic games
 - Colored ribbons awarded
- 8th Grade Graduation
 - County-wide 8th graders went to Chautauqua Park in Pontiac [Livingston County]

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- I remember how the older students when they got their work done, would help the younger ones.
- They'd pronounce spelling words to us or do math problems on the board.
- Early on, I loved being helped—then couldn't wait to be the helper as I got older.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Each year, on average, there were 12-15 kids spread over the eight grades.
- From first through sixth grades, Johnny Kaeb and I were the only ones at the same grade level.
- I finished seventh and eighth grade alone. I missed him—it just wasn't as interesting or as much fun to be alone in class.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Eighth grade for everyone was the most exciting time.
- All eighth graders were required to take an examination, testing whether they were ready to be promoted into high school.
- Graduation was a huge event because the commencement exercises was held at the Chautauqua Park in Pontiac for all the eighth graders in the region.
- Unfortunately, by the time it was my turn, the Depression had started and the school board budget was cut way back. After looking forward to this event for years and watching my three older brother graduate, I received my diploma in the mail.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- As much as I enjoyed my hours inside the school, our school world outside had magical appeal.
- Like all kids, I loved the word "Recess." I remember one year one of the older boys rode his bicycle to school. He was generous with his bike and had lots of patience.
- If a student didn't already know how to ride, he or she did by the end of that year.
- We would take turns practicing on the road in front of the school.
- We didn't worry about cars or other traffic like we do now.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- We also played a lot of softball and Andy High Over, a special game suitable only for a one-story schoolhouse.
- We split into two teams and hit a rubber ball over the roof of the school...a kind of volleyball with the school building as the "net."
- It was really fun and instilled a great sense of team work in us. Even our teachers played.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Two big events each years included the whole community
- the Christmas program and the year-end track meet.
- Both events hold some of my very best memories. As a little girl who had no choice but to become a tomboy in order to keep up with her brothers, I particularly remember the fun of the track meets.
- Several nearby schools would come together to take part.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Most of the parents, a lot of the surrounding neighbors, whether they had children in school or not, and family guests gathered for a huge picnic and to cheer their favorite Pearson sports celebrity to the finish line.
- When the outside events concluded, we'd go back inside and have dictionary races or recite pieces that we'd memorized.

Dictionary Race: See which student can find a new word in a dictionary.

Student Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- The fathers would help with the outside events and the mothers with the inside ones.
- We were awarded blue, red, and white ribbons for the first three places.
- I still have in my childhood scrapbook for my running and high-jump winnings.
- By the end of the 1930's as school districts consolidated further and buses were purchased, the country schools began to close

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Sadly, I got my first job because my dear mother, Bridget Glennon, had become ill and was retiring.
- She had been teaching at Avoca for five years.
- Coincidentally, I had just completed my studies at ISNU with a 2-year teaching certificate and was looking for a job.
- Even though I was just 19 years old, the local school board hired me to fill the position.

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- I worried all that summer about the big shoes I had to fill; Mom was very well liked and known throughout the countryside as a fine teacher.
- How could I possibly replace her?
- With her encouragement, I gradually calmed my nerves and soon began to feel at home in my one-room schoolhouse in front of the 12 or so students who lived in the square mile sections surrounding the school.

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Just like in my dream, teaching truly was second nature to me. It also helped enormously that the kids were well behaved, polite, and enjoyed helping one another.
- When the older children had their own work completed. they often helped the younger ones.
- They liked to pronounce spelling words, practice math problems on the blackboard, and make up multiplication table flashcards.
- Given that I had eight grades to oversee, it certainly helped to have my ready and willing "teaching assistants" nearby.

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- I particularly remember cold days inside, huddling near the big furnace that served both as our heater and our stove.
- We often heated soup and other leftovers from our lunch pails on top of the furnace. Those are such warm-hearted memories.
- When I think of my four years teaching at Avoca, learning together through teamwork, mixed with an overlay of coziness, friendship, and fun, all immediately and fondly come to mind.
- The goal of providing "positive learning environments" is so often spoken of these days in educational and parenting circles—Avoca School had that and then some.

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- Though very old-fashioned by the standards of schools over the last 60-plus years, Avoca was quite modern in its day and the envy of many students and teachers in surrounding schools.
- We had inside restrooms—two of them!—and electricity.
- We even had a radio so we could tune into a popular daily educational program

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- One special Avoca memory really sticks out in my mind as symptomatic of how times have changed.

It still makes me laugh! One of my youngest students, Harold Hish, lived at the Pumping Station with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Luther Hish, and his little brother, Donald.

- Three-year-old Donald decided one day to visit Harold at school and rode his tricycle right down the gravel road from their house nearly a mile away. There were times that road could be very busy with trucks and tractors pulling farm implements so I was sure Donald's mother would be frantic once she realized he was nowhere around.

Teacher Memories –Mary Frances Rigsby

- I had no telephone in the school with which to call her, Harold seemed too young to be trusted to get his adventurous brother home, and I couldn't leave the other students alone in the schoolhouse.
- So I did the next best thing. I piled all the students, three-deep, Donald, and the tricycle into my car and away we went to return him to his mothers arms.
- It's a good thing we didn't have to worry about seat belts or a policeman being anywhere nearby!
- We returned to school safely and were never visited by young Donald again.

Country School Obsolescence

Ag Mechanization

Allis-Chalmers Tractors

The Allis-Chalmers Model "B" was introduced at the end of the 1930s and caused a revolution in tractor design. It was the first small, light and inexpensive tractor that still had enough power to accomplish plowing, cultivating and harvesting tasks. It was designed to take advantage of what Allis saw as an underserved market in American agriculture.

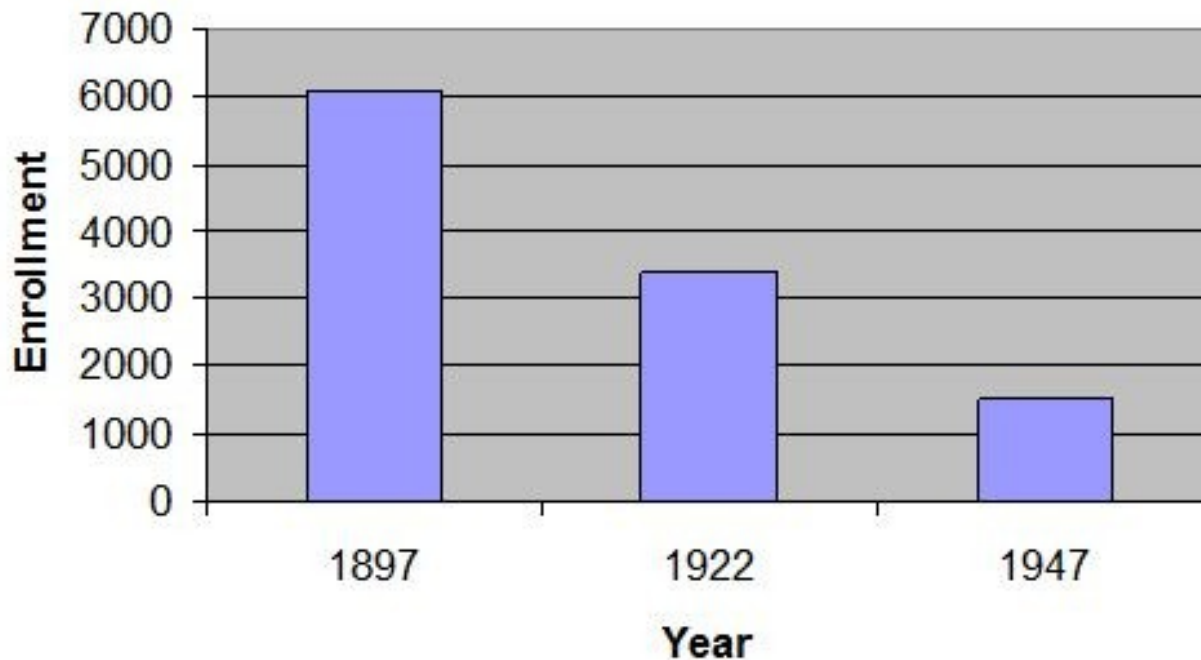
- By 1940, most farmers with over 100 acres had purchased tractors.
- But out of the 6.8 million total farms in America, 4 million were smaller than 100 acres.
- Most of those farmers did not own a tractor.
- U.S. farmers grew 149 million acres of row crops (like corn or soybeans) that needed to be cultivated, as opposed to 119 million acres of uncultivated small grains (like wheat or oats). Row crops grow higher and need to be cultivated.
- What these farmers needed was the small, light, high clearance and cheap tractor – like the Allis-Chalmers Model "B."

The tractor sold like hot cakes, in large part because it was the first model that sold for less than \$500. Within months, there was a "\$500 class" of tractors within the industry. Allis-Chalmers went from claiming only four percent of the market in 1929 to be the third largest tractor manufacturer in 1939. They accomplished this feat because they were willing to accept a small rate of return on their investment in order to gain larger volume and greater market share. In the 1940s, Allis received a 4.0 percent profit, while IH made 6.7 percent, and John Deere insisted on an 18.1 percent return.



Allis-Chalmers Model "B" plowing.

Number of Livingston County Rural School Students



Average Enrollment per Country School:

1897 => $6,000/299 = 20$ pupils

1947 => $1,500/299 = 5$ pupils

Death of Country Schools

- Consolidations started in 1930's during Great Depression
- Enrollments were down and budgets were cut
- 1949-1950 school year was the last for Country Schools in Livingston County
- 1950-1951 Fairbury rural students went to Edison or Isaac Walton in Fairbury
- Many teachers switched to teaching at city schools

Fate of Country School Buildings

- Within 1 year of closing, most buildings were sold at public auction
- Contents also sold at public auction (desks, etc)
 - Former students bought their desks
- Some were converted to machine sheds or small houses
- A few were preserved as museums
- Less than 10% still stand today



Charles Maley desk from Lodemia Country School



Fate of Pearson Country School

– 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery North of Fairbury

- Was likely named for Pearson, the farmer who owned the land
- Many Pearsons buried in the Avoca Cemetery
- School was converted into a machine shed after it closed
- Is still standing, but in very bad condition

Pearson Country School – 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery



1 Large
classroom
with small
vestibule
attached in
front.

“1 Room
Schoolhouse”

Pearson Country School – 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery



Pearson Country School – 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery



- Farmer did not properly support roof when adding sliding doors.

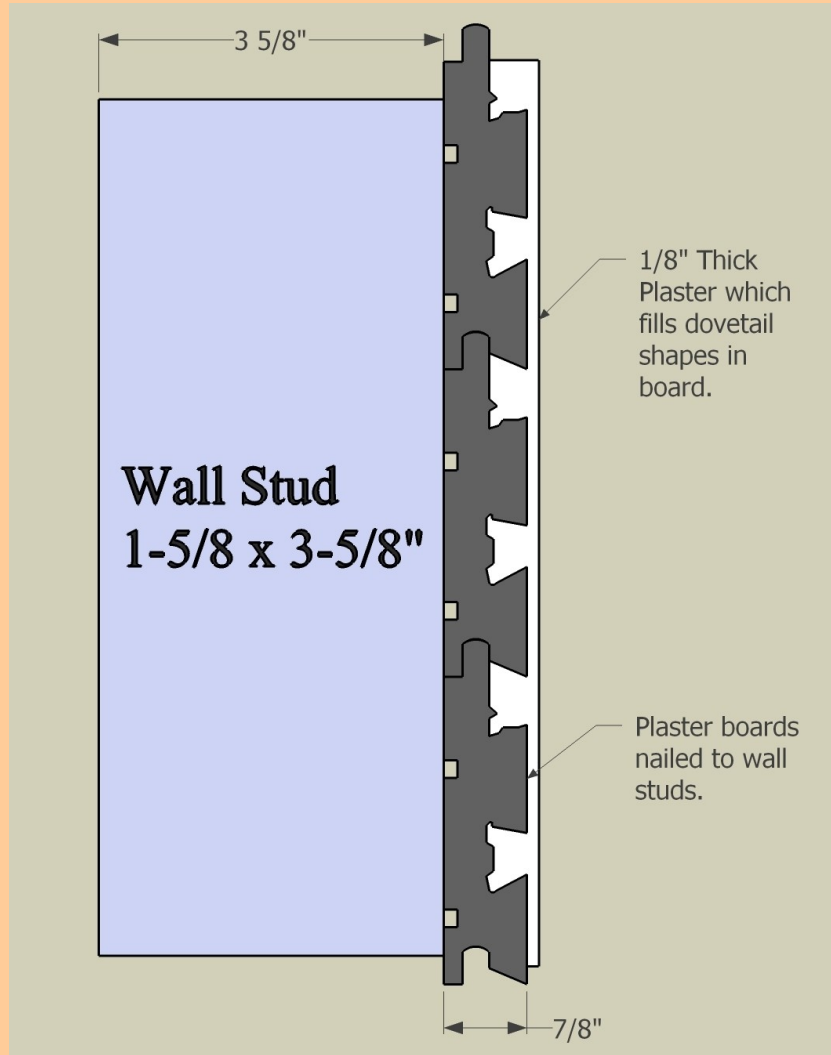
Entire roof is sagging as a result.

Pearson Country School – 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery



Once roof starts leaking, entire building decays quickly !

Pearson Country School – 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery

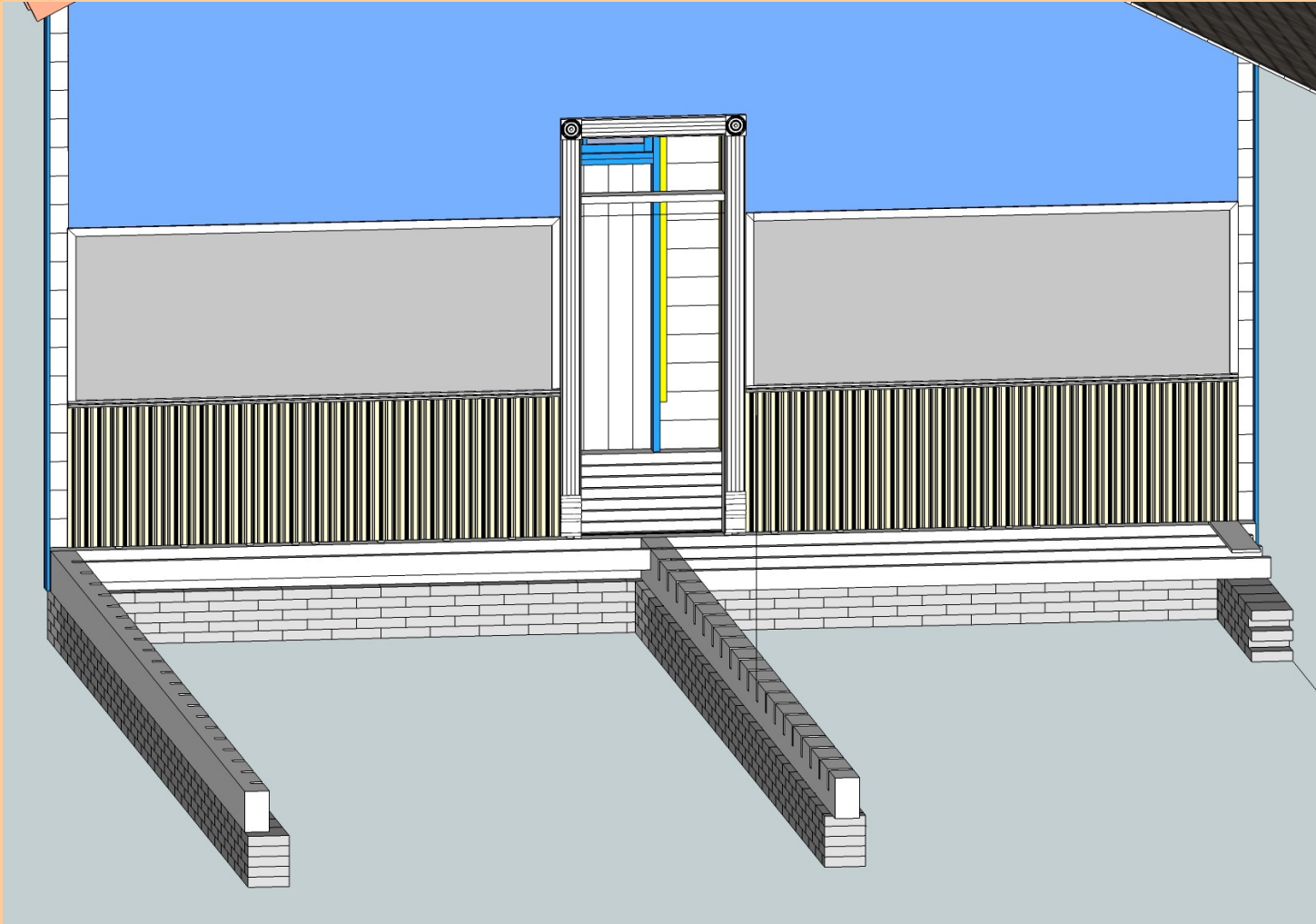


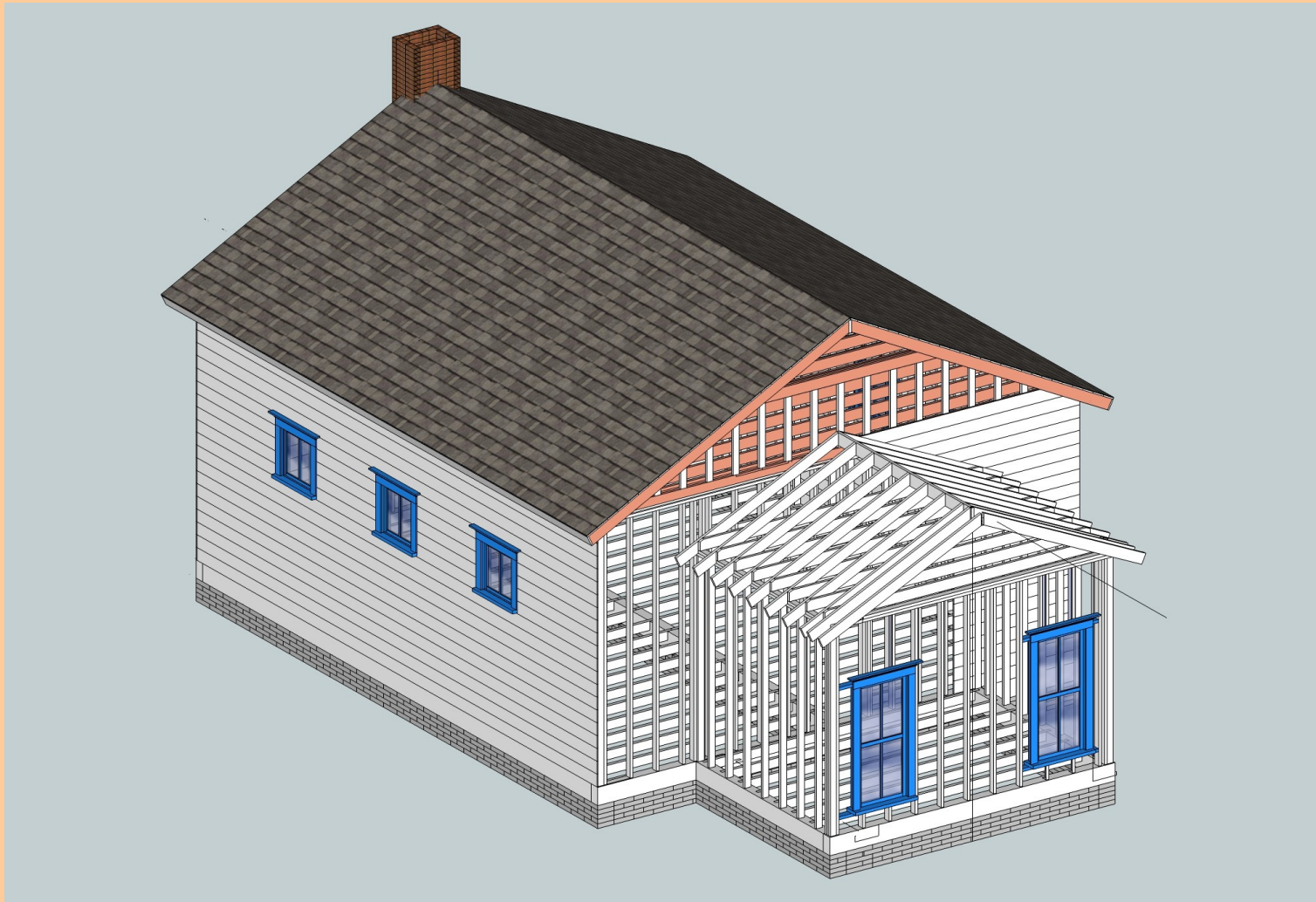
May have been built between 1920 and 1940.

Lathe was used before this special board.

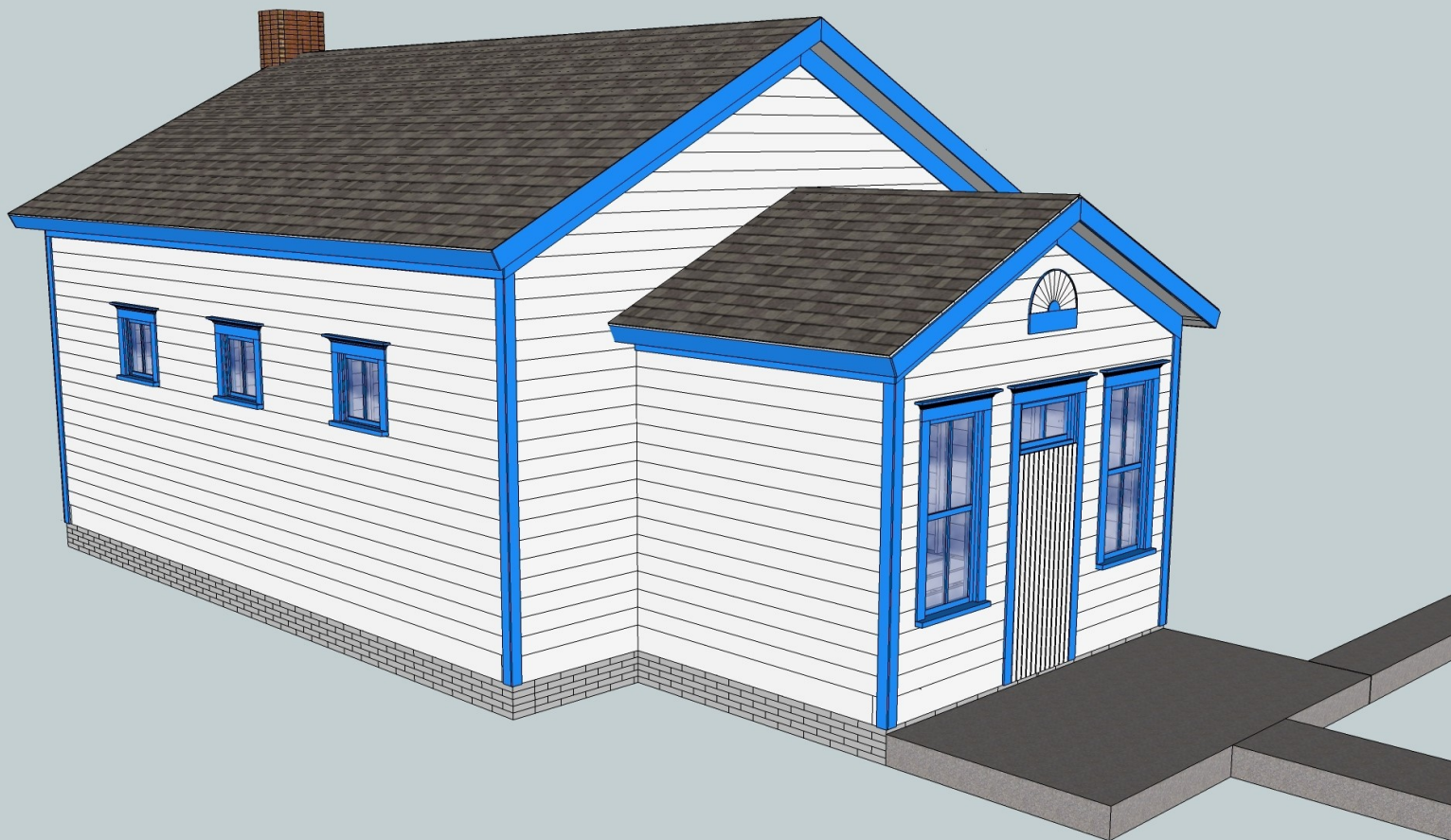
An 1860 schoolhouse would have solid wood walls.

Pearson Country School – 1 Mile East of Avoca Cemetery





Complete schoolhouse design in Sketchup Drafting Program

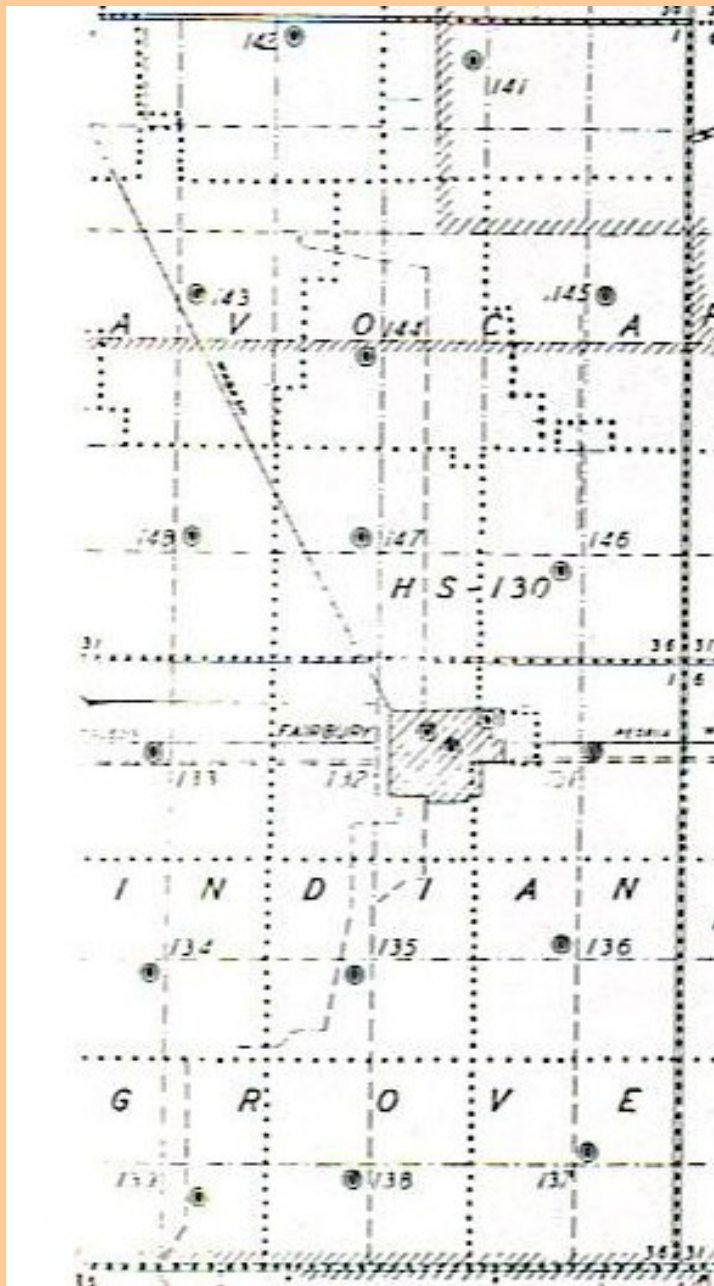


Excellent Livingston County Country School Reference Book

Lucile Goodrich
was Livingston
County School
Superintendent

A LIVINGSTON COUNTY SCRAPBOOK (1855-1975)

LUCILE GOODRICH
County Supt. of Schools
Livingston County, Ill.
1947-1971



Book has map
showing all 299
Country Schools in
Livingston County and
their names

Preserving Country School History

- In Livingston County, 2 Country Schools survive in good condition
 - 1860 School at Spence Farm south of Fairbury
 - Chatsworth Country School located in downtown Chatsworth
- Fairbury Echoes Museum collection contains:
 - Attendance Records
 - Grade reports
 - Written memories of one woman as a student and then a country school teacher (Mary Frances Rigsby)
 - Several Blade newspaper articles about Country School local history

Summary

- Country Schools were the educational system for about 100 years (1850-1950)
- Was designed for an agricultural based society where over 90% of population lived on farms
- Mechanization of agriculture reduced the number of farmers to below 1% of the population
- Surviving students from country schools all have favorable memories of their country school experience

Questions?